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C O N F I D E N T I A L KATHMANDU 002343

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/30/2016
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SUBJECT: CODEL KOLBE PUSHES FOR SOLUTION FOR BHUTANESE
REFUGEES

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister K.P. Oli suggested to CODEL Kolbe on August 25 that the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) and the Government of Nepal (GON) should give bilateral talks one more chance, even though the last 15 rounds of talks have been unsuccessful. During a subsequent visit to the Bhutanese refugee camps in southeastern Nepal, the CODEL found that many of the leaders in the Bhutanese refugee community were pushing for a solution consisting of repatriation only, although many refugees indicated that they would like to resettle to a third country. Meanwhile, the GON has indicated that it will allow the 16 vulnerable cases to be resettled within the next few weeks. End Summary.

Deputy Prime Minister Ambivalent About Resettlement

¶2. (C) In a meeting on August 25, House Appropriations Foreign Operations Subcommittee Chairman Jim Kolbe (R-AZ) stressed to Deputy PM Oli the USG's willingness to re-settle 50,000-70,000 Bhutanese refugees. Oli agreed with Chairman Kolbe that security in the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal could become problematic as young people in the camps became increasingly fed up with their situation and influenced by the Maoists. Oli lamented that 15 years of talks between the GON and RGOB only paid "lip service" to the problem. Oli mentioned he had had a discussion with the RGOB Foreign Minister Wangchuk in Kuala Lumpur on the sidelines of a recent SAARC meeting and had urged the FM to finalize a solution to the refugee problem. This discussion yielded no results.

¶3. (C) Oli indicated that if the RGOB was not willing to talk, then third country resettlement could be an option. Oli said he planned to hold serious talks with the RGOB on refugees. He requested that Chairman Kolbe, during his visit to Bhutan, remind the RGOB that, in the absence of a

solution, the refugees will grow increasingly upset and become harder to repatriate. Oli expressed his concern at the growing Maoist infiltration in the camps. Oli also stressed the importance to Nepal that the RGOB be held responsible for the original expulsion of the refugees from Bhutan, in order to make less likely a further expulsion of ethnic Nepalis from Bhutan.

Many Refugees Push for Repatriation

¶4. (SBU) During an August 27 visit to two refugee camps in eastern Nepal by CODEL Kolbe, a large group of refugees at one camp protested against any solution to the Bhutanese refugee situation other than 100-percent repatriation back to Bhutan. Chairman Kolbe and the Ambassador both stressed to a smaller group of refugees that the U.S. would like to see repatriation as one solution to the problem. They stated that the U.S. was looking at other possibilities as well, including resettlement of large numbers of refugees to the United States. Most of the political leadership of the two camps told the CODEL that they wanted dignified repatriation as the only solution. Many others attending the meeting appeared interested in resettlement and asked concrete questions regarding the rights that a resettled refugee would enjoy.

¶5. (C) Some refugees, however, shared with the CODEL publicly that they would like to find a solution to the problem, even if that meant not repatriating to Bhutan. Despite what appeared to be a concerted effort by camp leaders to promote their view of repatriation as the only solution, a large number of refugees passed written appeals to the CODEL and the Ambassador asking for resettlement to the United States. Their principal concerns seemed to be that third-country

resettlement be voluntary and be made available to all those who wish it, not just a select few. The refugees charged that the RGOB was spreading rumors about impending resettlement from the camps to encourage the remaining ethnic Nepalis to leave Bhutan.

Vulnerables Still Waiting to Leave

¶6. (C) Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Oli has indicated repeatedly, including in a meeting with the Ambassador on August 18, that he would approve issuance of travel documents to 16 vulnerable Bhutanese refugees for resettlement to the U.S. and Canada. A source in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated on August 29 that Oli would approve the issuance of the documents immediately upon his return from China on September 1. UNHCR said that it is ready to process the cases as soon as the travel documents were issued.

Comment

¶7. (C) The RGOB shows no willingness to allow the repatriation of any of the refugees, including the 200-plus refugees who were recognized by the RGOB as Bhutanese. The Bhutanese refugee leadership continues to push for repatriation as the only solution. The potential for Maoist infiltration makes a rapid solution important. That said, both the GON and the vast majority of the refugees seem to be inching toward a realization that third country resettlement could ameliorate conditions in the camps tremendously.

MORIARTY